



Rachel

by Benjamin Dancer

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Rachel pushed the accelerator to the floor board, and the two-tone, tan and buckskin, 1978 Chevy Scottsdale leapt forward and swallowed a three foot high sagebrush under the front bumper.

Moses trotted for the aspens beneath the beaver ponds.

“Oh, no you don’t!”

Grass slapped the chromed grille. Rachel bounced on the bench seat, cranked the steering wheel, ran over willow shrubs, an aspen sapling and smashed her foot into the brake pedal.

The pickup barred his path.

Next to the bull the vehicle seemed small. Moses was taller than the cab. From nose to tail, he was several feet longer than the bed of the truck. He grunted, swung his massive head and trotted to get around the pickup.

Rachel threw the transmission into reverse, watched Moses through the driver’s-side mirror, playing the accelerator and the brake to keep the truck between the two thousand pound animal and the trees. She turned Moses in a semicircle.

He broke into a bounding gait.

Through the side mirror, Rachel saw the back end of the truck smash through a shrub of wax currant. The wheel behind her jumped, the cab rocked and her head nearly hit the triangular vent window.

She stopped, put the transmission in drive and turned the truck so she could better steer the terrain.

Dust obscured her view of the other forty-three bison following Moses at a bound toward the south gate. She kept her distance, slowly bouncing over badger holes.

Rachel was eight years old when her father was routed from the house by a fusillade of words. She hadn’t had time to unwrap her present: a wooden doll house, empty and about as tall as she was in 1975.

When she was twelve, she knew she’d have to leave like he did. Got a job as a waitress, moved into an apartment when she was sixteen, graduated from high school early then spent

the next five years trying to survive.

She had paid cash for the Scottsdale on her twenty-first birthday, a present to her from her—the only gift since 1975 she had received. As she drove the truck home from the dealer's lot, it occurred to her, without any taint of self-pity, that nobody else was going to give her anything.

Moses saw the open gate and turned, trotting parallel to the fence. The herd followed.

She gunned the V8 engine, smashed into an antelope brittlebrush. The front end popped up. She rocked over sage and junipers, bracing herself with the steering wheel to keep her skull from breaking the back window. She cranked the wheel, skidded to a stop and cut the animal off.

Moses pawed the ground. Dust rose and drifted through his hindlegs. He raised his head, opened his mouth and bellowed; his tail stood erect. Then he lowered his head and charged.

Rachel moved away from the door.

The bull bounded, three or four feet between him and the earth, and landed on all four hooves, his sharp horns inches from the sheet metal. He looked Rachel in the eye and snorted.

Rachel aimed Billy's .44 magnum revolver at Moses' head and cocked the hammer. "You put a scratch on that door, and I'll put this bullet in your brain, come back with the skid steer to pick you out of the grass, load your prodigious carcass in the bed of this old truck and drive you straight to the butcher."

Moses grunted, nostrils flaring. His wooly face huge between his brown eyes.

She could smell the grass on his breath. "Now git!"

Moses blinked, swung his mountainous neck and trotted back toward the herd. He charged the first bull he saw, Hippie's Son. Their craniums collided with a crack Rachel heard from the truck.

Moses was pushing the younger bull steadily backwards when Rachel drove around them and pushed the herd into the south gate.

The day Jack vanished, taking nothing but the clothes on his back and the cash in the safe, two government men came in a black SUV. They had her look at pictures of foreign women she didn't know. When she denied that Jack knew those women, the men showed her a stack of emails.

At that, she broke and was never whole again.

Rachel unloaded the revolver and put it away in Billy's room. She took off her denim coat, pulled the phone from her jeans' pocket and called the butcher as she walked the hall to the front of the house.

"Todd, it's Rachel." She stopped at the living room window to look at Moses. He was fighting another bull. "Can I bring Moses over this afternoon?" Rachel walked to the kitchen, laid her coat over the back of a wooden chair, took a stainless-steel colander from the pot rack and set it in the sink. "Thanks, Todd."

She poured the red beans she had been soaking into the colander, rinsed the beans, poured them back into the stock pot then filled the pot with cold water. She struck a match, lit two gas burners and set the beans on the nearest fire.

She partially filled a sauce pan with water, lidded it and set it over the other fire.

Pulled out a square baking pan and two glass mixing bowls from the oak cabinet. Corn meal, flour, baking powder, salt and sugar from the pantry; she stacked the mixing bowls inside the baking pan and arrayed the ingredients on the granite countertop.

She opened the fridge and checked for milk, eggs and butter then lined the spices by the stove: green chili powder, ground cumin, oregano, dried cilantro, black pepper, celery salt. Took a package of ground bison from the freezer and set it in the sink to thaw.

She piled onions, garlic, red bell peppers, green chiles, jalapeños and roma tomatoes near the cutting board. Then cored the tomatoes with a paring knife, sliced off the bottom tips, scored the skins and peeked through the glass lid into the sauce pan.

The water was boiling.

She filled a bowl with cold water, set it by the stove and added ice from the freezer. Scooped the tomatoes from the cutting board—three at a time—with a slotted ladle, placed them in the boiling water and turned off the gas to the burner.

Rachel ladled the blanched tomatoes into the ice water. Then took them out with her fingers, pulled their skins off, quartered them into wedges on the cutting board and pushed out the seeds with her thumbs.

"Goddamnit," she wiped her eyes with her knuckles. Rachel turned around, looked across the empty house and began to

cry.

She pressed her tomato-stained palms together around her nose, straightened her spine, pulled her shoulders back and flung off the tears. “Shit!”

Jack taught her to make green chili on a wood-burning stove when they were living in the yurt. Each night the chili froze, and each afternoon they put the huge pot back on the stove. They ate it for near a week before they had to ski down the Milestone Valley and resupply.

By spring, she was pregnant.

She had never known anybody like Jack. By the way he stood in a room, she could tell he was different.

Before they met, Jack had lived on three other continents; he spoke Spanish and Arabic on the telephone. And was always explaining how different life was for people in other countries. He talked of their generosity, exotic foods, and entertained her with bizarre stories about their religious beliefs. Men—he had witnessed—buried alive in the jungle and dug up healthy days later; tribal men who pierced their torsos with lances, bloody holes through their bodies, and survived; fire walkers; goddesses; human sacrifice.

She was twenty-three years old and thought he was eccentric.

Rachel drew a bath, pulled off her white t-shirt, unfastened her bra, put her cell phone on the counter by the sink, sat on the toilet to take off her boots and socks, stood up and dropped her jeans and panties to the ceramic tile floor.

She colored the clay to look like water, rolled the tiles on the kitchen table, fired them and laid the ocean in her bathroom on her fortieth birthday. When she turned forty-one, she installed a bronze bust of herself beneath the window—head tossed back, arms at her side, hands still beneath the surface.

Rachel tied up her hair and slipped into the steaming water. With each passing year, she was more and more generous with herself.

She would load Moses in the trailer when Billy came home.

Benjamin Dancer teaches English at the Jefferson County Open School in Lakewood, Colorado. His fiction has appeared in *Fast Forward Volumes I and II*, *decomp magazinE*, *SFWP.org*, *Monkey Puzzle #7*, *Ducts*, and *Diverse Voices Quarterly*. *Rachel* is an excerpt from the third book in *The Father Trilogy*, more of which can be found at BenjaminDancer.com.

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